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ABSTRACT

This document summarizes a presentation and student responses from a workshop for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) attended by 84 GTAs. The focus of the presentation and discussions was on the first day of class, setting goals for the course and introducing the subjects and the instructor. Participants entered their comments into an "Alpha Smart" typing unit for transfer to a personal computer. Student responses describe their experiences on the first day of teaching and tell what they learned in the GTA workshop. The document includes some to-do lists and organizational forms that a teacher can use to prepare for the first day of class. One figure presents an instructional design approach for the first day of teaching. (SLD)

"The first day of class: establishing rapport as well as ground rules"

A presentation for the GTA/ITA Orientation
Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning

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Abstract:

This session addresses the many items necessary for completion before or on the first day of class. All of a sudden, when you enter the classroom the first day, you are the center of attention with between 35-300+ students staring at you. What happens the first day determines the rest of the semester—at least that is what we think.

The presenter:

Dr. Hudson has been a teacher of adults in various settings since 1971. He has had many "first days." Actually, selling cookware door-to-door, making those "cold calls", was about the best preparation for the first day in the classroom.

He is known as a "pacer", walking around and through various offices on the first day of class, just to get "psyched." Teaching solely on the Web now, first days have even more challenges, as students do not see each other or the instructor, so the usual verbal and non-verbal expressions are not available.

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My first day of class:

Prepared I was, having planned my entire first day of an 8 hour class, including time out for a 30 minute lunch. I proudly walked into the classroom, quickly introduced myself, started showing transparencies, and lectured about what I was ready for today. I was ready!

At the end of 40 minutes I was done, not done for a break—DONE for the day. I had covered everything I had prepared, asked no questions and gotten no participation. I looked up from the overheads to the students who appeared a little stunned. So, pleased with myself I rhetorically asked, “Any questions?” One hand slowly rose into the thin air and the student timidly asked, “What did you say after your name?” Now these were adults, well out of high school anyway, and I could not understand why there could possibly be any questions at all. After all the content was basic stuff, I knew it well. Anyway, I responded with some blank look, I think, then stated that a short break might be in order.

Stepping into the hallway to recover, I pondered deeply and quickly. Have I made a bad career choice here? What happened? What do I do the rest of the day, week, year, lifetime?

And that was my first day! How about yours?

Larry Hudson (August 1971, Lexington, Kentucky)

Participants:

On Monday August 6 and Thursday August 9, 2001, from 1:00-2:15 PM, 84 GTAs attended this workshop. Although no names are included here, the author is extremely grateful for their participation and contributions.

Reflection time:

This was a small group “brainstorming” activity. Using 10 minutes participants were asked to write a few comments Each person was to answer either question below. The lists below were generated from the participants at either of the two sessions. Each small group was provided with an Alpha Smart typing unit, (<http://alphasmart.com>) typing their answers in a specific file of the Alpha Smart unit. The answers were then sent via USB cable attached to a PC, after the workshop. These were saved in a “Word” file, and edited for spelling and grammar.

What was your first day of teaching like?

1. I had a class of 300 and got the first idea of how many faces there are in that number expecting anything & everything from the students.
2. On my first day of teaching a class I stood behind the desk and did not move for anything in the world. I used the desk as a barrier.
3. The student (saxophone student) got more for his money – I didn’t know when to STOP teaching each lesson. Wanted to keep the session going longer than contracted.
4. Junior year, they were my friends, not very scary or eventful b/c I was comfortable with them and knew their level and abilities
5. First time teaching, students were asking questions regarding to what THEY should expect and I didn’t have the answers since it was my first class. Had to consult and get back to them later.
6. Economics and had no way to put graphs on the board – someone had stolen all of the markers. Try to explain a theory to first-year students without the use of a graph. It was a short class.
7. The first day I taught, I had too much material, and made sure what the materials were about. When I entered the class, I went through the materials with students, and asked them to make sure they understand it. It took almost 15 minutes. Later on, it was much better. Sometimes on conclusion, I emphasized some points, and feedback is good.
8. On the first day of class I started writing on the board immediately and did not stop for 18 min. When I turned around I realized that most students were not paying attention and were working on other projects. I requested that the students pay attention to the first part of the lecture and would let them work on their project after that. I blame that situation on not making the class participate.
9. On my first class, I prepared a 30 minute talk. But I was so nervous that I spoke very fast, only using 10 minutes to finish my talk, which made me feel more nervous.

10. I met the students in my class after giving their first homework grades. The cheaters whom I cut their notes up wanted to kill me. But I had strong points to defeat them, like martial arts, (just kidding); those points or evidence are, of course, their identical papers as copied by a photocopier.
11. When I started talking, the fire alarm in Engineering building went on and everybody coolly walked off.
12. On the first day of my lab all the computers were down and I couldn't go on with the schedule
13. The first day of class went on well. Got introduced to the class, was a bit nervous first but everything went on well.
14. I was all nervous and shaking but luckily things went on smooth. I was obviously relieved at the end.
15. I was very anxious and feeling like that I didn't know anything about the topic I was teaching.
16. In the first ten minutes, I was nervous, I spoke slowly, not smoothly, after I went through that, I was fine.
17. Overcame initial nervousness.
18. The first time I entered the lab, I prepared many materials. However, the students (freshmen) could not understand those things.
19. At the first day, I introduced myself and the course to my students. And then, I told them how to learn this course more effectively.
20. When my friend started teaching, the stuff he was teaching was very easy. He prepared a lot of material thought, he just told the students what to do.
21. My first day teaching was so horrible. First, I did not know I was going to be teaching when I signed up for the Performance Practicum Class. It was at 7:00 AM and the other graduate student who was supposed to teach with me did not show up. So, I managed to introduce myself and advise the students to come properly dressed for the next class. Then, I dismissed the class. The second day I had index cards so I wouldn't forget about the exercises I planned to teach my dance students.
22. My first experience was in spring 2001. Besides being a non-native American it was also my first time to give a course to a class full of 75 people. I was kind of pushed into teaching at the last minute. So that day I stepped into the class, started by saying my name but I was sure that they were not able to understand my accent very well. I had so many slides to complete, but I was so fast that finished even a little bit earlier. I remember people sleeping. But I learned a lot.

23. When I found the room at last, there was a lady standing near the table. So I thought I entered the wrong room and waited outside. But she was only a student submitting her assignment.
24. I also realized that I forgot to tell my name to the students after class ended.
25. My first day as a teacher was luckily not a disaster. The class I was going to teach was famous for their behavior and i was prepared for that. Coming from the student life from the same university also helped me dealing with the students. It was not bad at the end.
26. The first day of class I expect to be nervous but I also expect I will get through it just fine. I was in retail for sixteen years and had to do a lot of thinking on my feet and in many ways was a type of teaching.
27. I went to the class and I expected the students to wish me, as I did when I was an undergraduate. But I didn't. they were nervous and me too. So I just asked for their names and let the class free. They were so happy and the rest of the semester went just fine.
28. My first day in the class was wonderful. For the first time in my life I felt that I am doing something great
29. I don't know how much they understood me because of my accent. But it was great experience on the first day.
30. It was boring.
31. I got sick and ran out of the room—the male principal had to come get me out of the ladies room.
32. Blank stares, no or few questions.
33. Didn't have much command or presence—pretty timid. Didn't feel comfortable. Just teaching field trips & giving them 3-hour packages. This will be a bit more important.
34. It is the first semester for me in U.S.A.I am very nervous in my class. And my English is not good, I am afraid the students won't understand me.
35. I over prepared the powerpoints carefully, and showed them how to follow the direction to do statistical analysis using excel. But because the students have different ability to understand, I have to go back and forth of my slides. This is my first day of class here.
36. On the first day I thought I could improve on being in control of the group. I found that I had to repeat myself before I could get a reaction from the students.
37. The class should be attentive and they should pay attention and there shouldn't be any questions from the students

38. There should be very few students in the class and the environment the class should be filled with fun.
39. I shouldn't forget the topic which I wan to teach and I should be able to express them well.

OR

What do you expect your first day of teaching to be like?

1. I've never been in the situation, but I think my first day would be good but scary and I'd try to get the student's attention by relating to them and to get to know each one of them.
2. Should be able to take roll and discuss syllabus
3. Might have students wanting to add the class over the class limit
4. Might mispronounce student's names
5. Might not have a complete syllabus ready
6. Might not have all of the class materials ready
7. Should be able to take roll and discuss syllabus
8. Might have students wanting to add the class over the class limit
9. Might mispronounce student's names
10. Might not have a complete syllabus ready
11. Might not have all of the class materials ready
12. I hope to be able to relax and get the students to relax and look forward to the class.
13. Pretty much, like you said, it'll take a while to get comfortable.
14. I do not have any experience.
15. Will get introduced to the students and enter a little bit into the subject
16. Question will be asked to which I don't know the answer.
17. A bit formal
18. People don't remember the first week anyway.
19. We don't do labs the first week.

20. They'll ask, "So what will be on the test?"
21. Nervous about respect that I'll get some "hecklers." Try to ignore them. Let them be...unless you are "quick on your feet."
22. What happened to the days when we could just ask them to leave? Students YELLING at professor. (student wasn't complying with regulations)
23. Everything is OK, I just feel a little nervous
24. I will definitely be nervous.
25. Introduce syllabus, answer basic questions.
26. Fear: not making sense or looking foolish.
27. I introduce myself, then I let the student to introduce themselves. Select their Spanish name and play game to know each other.
28. I should first introduce myself and tell them the content and request of class. How to score their grade, the plan the class.
29. I will feel very nervous in my first class. I think if I can prepare more it will be better.
30. I will prepare all the stuff ahead, and not sure I can handle something, which I do not expect.
31. I was too much in awe with the teaching setup and was feeling a bit shy in class.
32. I will be late for class.
33. I would be going too fast probably in my first class due to my nervousness.
34. For the first day, the basics concepts of the lab should be overviewed and an overlook of major dates for the semester.
35. I expect the students to be prepared to learn and eager to develop skills that will sculpt their mind.
36. For the first day, the basics concepts of the lab should be overviewed and an overlook of major dates for the semester.
37. I will have only one word to say: uhhhhhhhhh..... followed by my rapid egress to the hallway where I will utter my second word: aaaaaaaah!!

38. On the first day of lab, I hope the experiments work and that people won't walk out of lab mad at me because something didn't work.
39. I expect the students to be prepared to learn and eager to develop skills that will sculpt their mind.
40. On the first day of lab, I hope the experiments work and that people won't walk out of lab mad at me because something didn't work.
41. The most important thing is what the students learned not what the teacher taught.
42. Ideally, the students will be so inspired by my presentation that they'll feel compelled to give me a standing ovation
43. On my first day I will be very nervous but very prepared. I will get to know my students.
44. Wish I can build good interaction with my students.
45. Prepare for everything that could happen in a lab. Be friendly to students and solve the problems with them.
46. I hope that my first day goes very well.
47. I hope to introduce myself & my course content in a clear, defined manner.
48. I'm afraid I will have too much time and not enough to say.
49. I will be very excited but I will also be nervous since I will not be much older than the students.
50. I am sure that there will be something new for me.
51. Most worried that I'll run out of things to say and not be able to fill an hour and 15 minutes.
52. Afraid the students will ask questions that I'll be unable to answer on the spot.
53. I do not have teaching experience so far. If I am on my first day, I should first give a short introduction of myself. Then tell students why they are here, and what this course is about. If time permits, I may give a short survey about the student, like their degrees, background, etc. then I will finish the first day assignment if there are. I may dismiss them earlier if possible.
54. Make sure you know where your 6 AM "back woods portable" is located.
55. Break the ice

56. Explain class disclaimer.
57. Get them excited.
58. Introduce teaching style
59. Meet them.
60. Warn them of drop/add and withdrawal date, plagiarism, policies, attendance.
61. Pass out class materials.
62. Get writing samples/diagnostics.
63. Make jokes (maybe), refrain from uhs and stuttering, no offensive commentary.
64. Pass out “panic buttons”, let them know when/where you’re available.
65. Command respect!!!!; show no fear.
66. Go over syllabus.
67. Make sure you have enough to say so you don’t do everything you planned in 2 minutes.

What did I learn today about being a GTA?

At the end of the workshop participants were once again asked to answer one question in a small group and type that answer into the Alpha Smart unit. These are those answers.

1. Don't embarrass students.
2. Bring towels (in case students get wet during afternoon rains in Central Florida)
3. No dating students.
4. Respect students' (life) schedules outside of class.
5. Feng shui around the overhead.
6. Make my students more comfortable.
7. Prepare well for the first class, then I'll be confident when facing my students.
8. Don't be afraid of the first day.
9. Feel comfortable to study in the front of the classroom.
10. Although first day carries a lot of importance it is surely not the last day and I can get over it if I am planned, open and informal.
11. Plan ahead of time in order to be prepared.
12. Have a plan.
13. There are many sources and facilities available to me for effective teaching
14. A good question to ask students to respond to is, "What do you want to learn in this course." This would give me a good idea of the student's expectations so I could best respond to them.
15. I have learned not to be very formal and also at the same time be friendly.
16. Be clear of what you are supposed to be teaching today.
17. Be organized in how to present yourself.
18. Now I am a teaching assistant and I am no longer a student.
19. I should help students
20. Try my best to be a good teacher.
21. Know and adapt to the group of students in front of you.
22. Physically go to the room and take the time to get comfortable in it, know it, get the layout of the room, etc.
23. Take the time to introduce yourself to the students. Make sure they know who you are, where you come from, what you expect and what THEY can expect.
24. Don't remain mysterious to your students.
25. Make sure all the materials you need are in the classroom. Don't take it for granted that everything you need will be in the classroom.
26. Do not speak fast.
27. Prepare the materials and handouts.
28. Be friendly but not a "buddy."
29. That the students are as nervous as I am.
30. Not to treat students too friendly
31. Prepare very well in advance but be flexible according to the needs.

32. Remember where the students are coming from and remember you were once there yourself.
33. The most important part of the first day comes from the preparation before the first day.
34. Prepare a syllabus with contact information and course objectives.
35. Establish good communication with the class.
36. The most wonderful thing is learning
37. Not to be embarrassed.
38. To think in a critical way.
39. Not to be intimidated--stay cool.
40. Be relaxed, and try to follow the strategies to the extent possible.
41. Indulge in a dialogue with a group of people.
42. Go to the classroom or lab a little earlier and get familiarized with the components.
43. Control your time, assign your time in the class fairly to every part.
44. Control the proceedings, not too fast, not too slow.
45. Make your students feel comfortable and do not only care about the class.
46. The longer I prepare for my class, the more comfortable I will feel in the class.
47. Expect the unexpected, relax, have fun and be self confident.
48. Have all necessary material ready.
49. Be able to communicate with the students.
50. The importance of the syllabus.
51. Being friendly to the students and not being very formal.
52. Communicate.
53. Say thank you.
54. Go to the class with a good plan.
55. Be specific in our teaching duties.
56. Syllabus is a legal document.
57. You-can-go approach.
58. Be prepared to wing it!
59. Be calm and sensitive to feelings about being late arrivals, etc.
60. Have empathy and understanding for students.
61. Group students for help.
62. Volunteer students.
63. Know the technology of the classroom
64. Be prepared for that first day of class; it will help to ease the stress and the anxiety of the day.

First day do-lists:

These are critical items, which need to be addressed before/on the first day of class.

For our use, tables have been developed to compare each item to your anticipated course to the first day of class this semester. Items are not in a specific order, as that may be inappropriate for your situation. Also, the list will need additions—got any ideas?

Course Syllabus

| <u>Item</u> | <u>Application to my class</u> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Course content | |
| Student objectives/competencies | |
| Assessment techniques | |
| Grading plan | |
| Text readings | |
| Text ordered & in stock | |
| Due dates identified | |
| Course semester schedule designed | |
| Syllabus printed | |
| | |

The classroom

| <u>Item</u> | <u>Application to my class</u> |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Room reserved | |
| Room arranged as you need | |
| Media reserved & accessible | |
| Media working & set up | |
| Chairs/desks/tables | |
| | |

Interaction

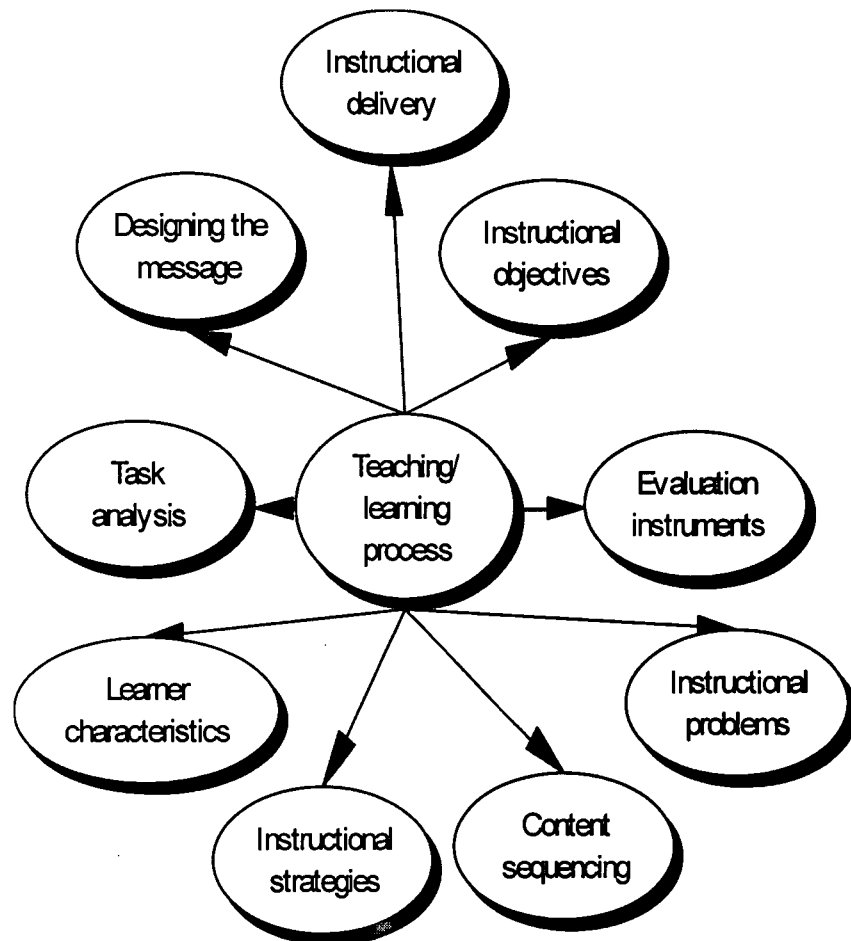
| <u>Item</u> | <u>Application to my class</u> |
|---|--------------------------------|
| Welcome greeting | |
| Introduction to students | |
| Introductions of students: to you to each other | |
| Seating assignments/arrangement | |
| Attendance record | |
| Assignment to groups/teams | |
| Overview course goal/objectives | |
| Use students' names | |
| | |
| | |

During the course

| <u>Item</u> | <u>Application to my class</u> |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Monitor students': progress attendance | |
| Grade assignments in timely manner | |
| Maintain current grades/scores | |
| Notify appropriate office/contact if late or absent from class | |
| Complete end of course "Final grade record" | |

Model for planning

A circular instructional design model was proposed because planning to teach is generally done systemically and not linearly. Maybe it is the way teachers think or just that we have certain items before others and not always in the preferred order.



(Kemp, J., Morrison, G., & Ross, S. (1998). Designing effective instruction, second edition. Upper Saddle river, NJ, Prentice Hall.)

Recommended references:

Kemp, J., Morrison, G., & Ross, S. (1998). Designing effective instruction, second edition. Upper Saddle river, NJ, Prentice Hall

Lyons, R., Kysilka, M., & Pawlas, G. (1999). The adjunct professor's guide to success: surviving and thriving in the college classroom. Boston, Allyn & Bacon.



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